

The University of Chicago

THE PLACE OF THE A PRIORI IN
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1935

By
RAY H. TURNER

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1938

The University of Chicago

THE PLACE OF THE A PRIORI IN
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1935

By
RAY H. TURNER

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1938



CHAPTER VI
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND THE A PRIORI

Some Propositions

In order to determine the place of the a priori in religious knowledge it will be necessary to present a few propositions that are fundamental and basic for this subject. These propositions are the result of a critical inquiry which we have made concerning the nature of knowledge and of that which is known. As a result of this inquiry we have come to the conclusion that objective relativism is the theory of knowledge which most adequately describes the nature of knowledge. The following propositions are based upon this theory of knowledge.

Concepts.--Concepts constitute those orders, patterns, or structures which (1) constitute the relationships between two or more existent, imaginary, or possible events as known or would be known by mind, and (2) which constitute the relationships between two or more concepts so perceived and so constituted; these concepts being designated by symbols, chiefly by the symbol of language. In order for any order to be a concept, this order must include that actual or possible event which is called "mind." Concepts always include mind, actual or possible, in the relationships which they constitute. Concepts, therefore, are always relative to mind. They are also objective since their nature is not wholly determined by mind and since the same concept can be known by two or more minds.

Concepts can be classified in two different ways. In the

first place there are (1) concepts of existence, and (2) concepts of possibility. In the second place there are (1) concepts of which we have knowledge, (2) concepts which determine our behavior but of which we have no knowledge, and (3) concepts which are the object of our concern but which we may or may not know and which may or may not determine our behavior in any specific instance.

This third group of concepts of the second type of classification constitutes the most abundant life for all people. The concepts of this group are the concepts of our concern since all people are basically concerned about attaining the most abundant life for themselves. They are the concepts which stir men to act and which also are the ultimate goal of their action. They are the alpha and omega of action, and hence are the same for knowledge since knowledge is primarily sought for the purpose of directing action to the end of satisfaction.

However, due to the fact of error, that order of actual and possible existence which we perceive and about which we have knowledge may not be that order of actual and possible existence which truly constitutes the most abundant life. Also, due to influences of which we are often unaware, those concepts which determine our behavior in particular instances may be neither those of which we have knowledge nor those which constitute the object of our basic concern. However, if and when these concepts of our basic concern become concepts of which we have accurate knowledge and which at the same time determine our behavior in each particular instance, our actions will be in harmony with the God-order.

Experience.--An experience is what happens to a sensitive organism when it comes into a relationship with something objective to itself. An experience is confined neither to a conscious-

ness of what happens nor to a feeling of this happening. It is rather the happening itself. Consciousness and feeling of this may or may not be part of the experience. Therefore a sensitive organism may have an experience without either feeling it or being aware of its nature.

All things in an actual or possible relationship to a sensitive organism are constituted by actual or possible experiences. Therefore the nature of everything, from the standpoint of sensitive organisms, is determined by what happens or what will happen to sensitive organisms when this given thing enters into various relationships with such organisms. This means that everything consists of actual or possible experience. Beyond actual or possible experience there is "no-thing" so far as sensitive organisms are concerned. Consequently, experience is relative to an event, or events, other than the percipient event which is the sensitive organism. The experience is what happens to the sensitive organism, and the nature of the what is constituted by certain related events.

Also we should note that every experience is the experience of something. Every experience signifies some object; it implies an object.

This logically gives rise to the problem of the nature of objects. Concerning this problem we submit the following propositions.

Objects.--An object is constituted by what sensitive organisms can do to it or by way of it, or by what it can do to sensitive organisms. This means that an object is constituted by actual or possible experiences. And, since experience is always constituted by certain relationships, an object is likewise constituted by certain relationships. Therefore an object is consti-

tuted by certain actual or possible relationships that one event has to certain other actual or possible events, one of which is an actual or possible sensitive organism.

An object can be experienced by a sensitive organism that is capable of awareness even prior to its awareness of the object. What happens to a sensitive organism is not necessarily and always dependent upon an awareness of it. Consciousness changes the nature of an object (1) by making it become an object as known, just as an individual's position in relation to some object makes it a right or a left object; (2) by mind's creating new attitudes and purposes in relation to the object, this being made possible by a consciousness of the object; and (3) by directing activities which alter conditions either or both within and without the organism of which it (consciousness) is a part. However, those happenings which the object causes and which consciousness cannot alter remain the same regardless of the presence or absence of a consciousness of these happenings, which happenings partially constitute the nature of the object.

Also, realizing that the nature of an object is constituted by its possibilities as well as by its existent characters, we must conclude that this object, prior to the presence of consciousness, possessed as possibilities those characters of the object which consciousness brought into existence. This means that it is possible for us to experience at least part of an object prior to either our awareness or our definition of it. This does not mean that merely the consciousness of an object enables us to experience the whole object. The mere presence and work of consciousness do not exhaust the possibilities of an object. Consciousness is not the one and only determinative factor of the nature of objects.

Objects can be classified and differentiated because of universals. A universal is an invariant order. It is that which constitutes the essence of an object. It is that which makes science possible. An object is defined on the basis of its universals. If objects were not characterized by universals, science would be impossible, knowledge would be a myth, and life would be void of any degree of stability whatsoever. Survival necessarily presupposes the existence of universals.

Orders.--Order is synonymous with pattern, structure, and relationship. It is constituted by a relationship between two or more events.

Existence contains innumerable orders, and these orders have possibilities for the formation of still more orders. Also, existence contains many orders that are only partially realized. Their full realization is still in the form of possibility.

We are absolutely sure of the existence of at least some order because survival, of which we are sure and of which there are many types, necessarily requires order. "Survival requires order, and to presuppose survival, apart from the type of order which that type of survival requires is a contradiction."¹ Therefore, in so far as we are sure of the existence of different types of survival, we are sure of the existence of corresponding types of orders.

Mind does not introduce conceptual orders into existence without their first existing in the form of possibilities. Mind cannot legislate for existence those conceptual orders that will be significant and true in so far as better understanding and control are concerned. These conceptual orders, in the form of pos-

¹A. N. Whitehead, Process and Reality (New York: Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 311.

sibilities, are there in relation to every possible mental attitude or purpose, and they are there prior to the expression of such attitudes or purposes.

Possibilities.--Possibilities constitute a part of every existent object. Each existent object has possibilities for becoming something more than its existential nature. If this were not so, knowledge would be a myth, for to know a thing is to know what will happen when it is brought into various relationships with other things. In other words, to know a thing is to know its possibilities. Also if the reality of possibilities is denied, we must deny the existence of any reality beyond immediate experience. This means that the denial of possibilities lands us in solipsism.

The ascription of any reality beyond immediate experience requires and represents such affirmation of the possible. To repudiate all such transcendence is to confine reality to the given, to land in solipsism, and in a solipsism which annihilates both past and future, and removes the distinction between real and unreal, by removing all distinction of veridical and illusory.²

Every possibility is possible because of the nature of those events which make it a real possibility. That is, every possibility is a possibility because of its a priori, because of the nature of that which makes it a possibility. And, that which makes something possible is a relationship of certain events. Possibilities are relative; they are relative to the events involved.

This means that a given possibility cannot be made an existent object without conforming to those ways of acting which are made necessary by the nature of the case. In order to make a possibility an existent object we must discover its a priori and act accordingly.

The A Priori and Knowledge.--The a priori is that which is

²C. I. Lewis, Mind and the World-Order (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 183.

determinative, inevitable, and unavoidable. By this we do not mean to rule out every determinative power of mind and the sensitive organism of which it is a part by maintaining that from the beginning of time, if such has ever been, the destiny of the universe was inevitably and unavoidably determined. However we do maintain that everything has its a priori; that is, that which has made it possible and which continues to maintain it. But this which is determinative, inevitable, and unavoidable in so far as man's relation to the universe is concerned, is a relationship which includes mind. Hence, mind is not just a puppet, for mind is included in that which is determinative for much of existence.

The a priori for any object is determinative, inevitable, and unavoidable in the sense that every existent object has its determinative basis in relation to mind, and in the sense that if any object is to be brought into existence it must be done according to certain ways that are inevitable and unavoidable in so far as its realization is concerned. And, in so far as this object is known or is in any way related to a sensitive organism which has a mind, the nature of the object, knowledge of it, and the way it is to be realized are partially determined by the nature of mind.

In order to clarify our conception of the a priori we wish to point out three different connections in which we use the term: (1) a priori knowledge, (2) the a priori for knowledge, and (3) the a priori for each existent and possible object.

A priori knowledge is knowledge which we know to be absolutely true since it is knowledge which cannot be denied without denying the implications of inevitable behavior. And, since behavior in general is known because of various feelings, of which we are absolutely sure, we have absolute knowledge of the exis-

tence of behavior. Therefore, any bit of knowledge is a priori knowledge when it is constituted by the implications of that behavior which is inevitable and necessary for the existence and maintenance of feelings.

There is not only a priori knowledge, but also there is the a priori for knowledge. Knowledge is made possible and is determined by a certain kind of interaction between mind and that part of the world which is external to it. This order of interaction constitutes the a priori for knowledge.

Since the summary statements concerning the a priori for an existent and possible object have been given in the first part of this section and in the last part of the section on Possibilities, we shall make no further statements concerning it.

Religion.--Religion is a devotion to that which is thought to be of supreme value. This devotion is that which is common to practically all phenomena which are called "religion." It is that which differentiates religion from all other phenomena, and also which determines whether or not a given phenomenon is religion.

A devotion to that which is thought to be of supreme value is what we find religion to be. The logical implication of this is that religion ought to be a supreme devotion to that which is of supreme value. This means that one of the most important tasks of a philosophy of religion is to determine the nature of that which truly constitutes the supreme value. However it has not been our purpose to try to do this in this thesis. Rather it is our purpose to endeavor to determine the place of the a priori in religious knowledge, in knowledge of that which is of supreme value. We shall do this on the basis of the foregoing propositions, these propositions being a summary of the first five chapters of this thesis.

A Priori Knowledge of God

As we have already stated, religion is a devotion to that object which is thought to be of highest value. Many different names have been given to this object by the various religions, but in spite of this difference in names, each name designates that object which is thought to be of highest value. Generally speaking, religionists have used the word "God" to designate this object. Though names are of little importance in a critical analysis of that which they are used to designate, we shall continue to use "God" for this object just because this name has been and still is widely used in this connection.

Since the term "God" is used by many to designate that which is believed to be of highest value, we would seem to have many gods, or many religious objects, for people vary in their beliefs concerning what is of highest value. However this is not so, for there cannot be a dozen or more highest values. There can be only one that is highest. Hence there can be only one God, one religious object. Since God is the highest value and since there can be only one highest value, we have a priori knowledge to the effect that there is only one God. This means that, when we define "religious object" as that object which is of highest value, there is only one religious object. Religion, to be sure, is a devotion to that which is believed to be of highest value, and consequently there are as many different and distinct religions as there are different conceptions of the highest good. (Religions also frequently differ according to different habits, customs, localities, races, etc.) Consequently there are many objects which are believed to be religious objects, but there can

be only one which is the religious object, for there can be only one object that is of highest value.

We have just stated that since God is the highest value, we have a priori knowledge to the effect that there is only one God. In order for us to see the truth of this statement, we must show that we have a priori knowledge of the existence of God, of that which is of highest value.

According to Mr. Wieman,

God is precisely that object, whatsoever its nature may be, which will yield maximum security and abundance to all human living, when right adjustment is made. With this definition of the term it cannot be doubted that God exists.³

If it be true that the existence of God cannot be doubted, upon what basis is it true?

As we have previously shown, we have a priori knowledge of existence. Each individual knows absolutely that he feels. This inevitably implies that he exists. And, more than this, it inevitably implies the existence of things and people other than himself since behavior which is inevitable for the maintenance of his feelings necessarily implies this other existence. And, since there is existence, there must be some security or survival; and consequently there must be something which makes possible, sustains, and upholds this which survives and has some degree of security.

On the other hand we know that there is some degree of insecurity, and that at times parts of existence, including people, cease to exist. We know this for the same reason that we know that we are suffering or that we cease to feel what we once felt. We have a priori knowledge of existence and non-existence, of security and insecurity, of life and death, and of joy and sorrow. We know

³H. N. Wieman, Religious Experience and Scientific Method (New York: Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 381.

absolutely that there is that which is good and that which is bad. In other words, without trying to say that all of existence and security is good, and that all of non-existence and insecurity is bad, we can say with absolute certainty that we have a priori knowledge of better and worse, of the fact that there are higher and lower values. If value did not signify security of human living, it would be meaningless. Therefore, since we have a priori knowledge of certain degrees of both security and insecurity of people and the rest of existence, we have a priori knowledge of better and worse.

This being true, we consequently have a priori knowledge of the best, of the fact that there is that order of existence which constitutes the greatest existent security and abundant living. The better necessarily implies the best. Therefore, since God is that which is the best, the highest value, we have a priori knowledge of the existence of God.

Further than this, we have a priori knowledge that God includes possibilities, for, as we have already seen, knowledge and survival necessarily imply possibilities. We know something about God or else we could not continue to live in our present complex social order. That is, we know something about that order of existence which renders life more worthful since we are able to so live with one another as to experience better and worse. Also we know that God survives, for we know that there is a survival of at least some degree of qualitative richness in human living. If this were not so, we would be forced to deny the reality of all values beyond those of momentary existence, and therefore we would have to take the position of solipsism. Inevitable behavior logically denies such a position.

On the basis that we necessarily do have some knowledge

of God and that God is more than any momentary experience, we conclude that God is constituted not only by that kind of existence which is best, but also that God is constituted by possibilities for the greatest security and abundance to all human living, for any existential best must have such possibilities in order to be the best. Knowledge of this is a priori knowledge.

The A Priori for God

God is that object which is supremely worthwhile. This is true just because people have chosen to designate this object by the term "God" and because the existence of such an object is verified by those principles which we have just stated. That is, we have a priori knowledge of the existence of the supremely worthwhile, or highest value. Also we have shown that we have a priori knowledge to the effect that this highest value is partially characterized by possibilities for a complete inclusion within its order of all of human existence when transformed to meet its requirements. Therefore, God is an object that is rooted and grounded, as it were, within existence. God is a certain kind of existence plus its corresponding kind of existential possibilities. (We use the phrase "existential possibilities" in order to differentiate those possibilities that are characteristic of an existential object from those possibilities that are characteristics of pure logic.)

Since God is partially characterized by possibilities, we can say in a certain sense that God, or the highest value, is an ideal. However this does not place God partially in the realm of willful imagination. The highest value is an ideal in the sense that the best and highest possible value is an order including possibilities which are now experienced only in the form of a very

generalized idea.

We should note that that which truly is the best, though in a sense an ideal, must be rooted in existence or else it could not be the best. The highest value cannot be pure imagination. It must be a certain order of existence which has the possibility for the full realization of those qualities which constitute the most abundant life. Therefore, since this possibility is now experienced only in the form of a certain general idea, we frequently speak of God as being an ideal, though in doing so we do not mean that God is a non-existent object. Concerning this Mr. Dewey says,

The view I have advanced is sometimes treated as if the identification of the divine with ideal ends left the ideal wholly without roots in existence and without support from existence. The objection implies that my view commits one to such a separation of the ideal and the existent that the ideal has no chance to find lodgment even as a seed that might grow and bear fruit. On the contrary, what I have been criticizing is the identification of the ideal with a particular Being, especially when that identification makes necessary the conclusion that this Being is outside of nature, and what I have tried to show is that the ideal itself has its roots in natural conditions; it emerges when the imagination idealizes existence by laying hold of the possibilities offered to thought and action. There are values, goods, actually realized upon a natural basis--the goods of human association, of art and knowledge. The idealizing imagination seizes upon the most precious things found in experience and projects them. We need no external criterion and guarantee for their goodness. They are had, they exist as good, and out of them we frame our ideal ends.⁴

Since God is an object and since every object is characterized by actual and possible experience, God is characterized by actual and possible experience. And, since experience is determined and constituted by actual and possible relationships between sensitive organisms and the rest of existence, God is determined and constituted by such a relationship. However, in the case of God, the sensitive organisms are human organisms. Other

⁴John Dewey, A Common Faith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), pp. 47 f.

organisms are included, but the experience of human organisms is that which determines whether or not the experience is of God.

In view of the fact that God is the highest value, and that the highest value is a certain order of existence plus its possibilities, God is that structure of existence and possibilities which determines, promotes, and constitutes the best experience of human organisms.

In the foregoing we have been implying certain things concerning that which constitutes the a priori for God. To be more specific the a priori for God is constituted by that order in existence which includes the possibility for that relationship between (1) human feelings, (2) mind, (3) action, (4) experience, and (5) existential objects, and which relationship constitutes the most abundant life for all people. Without human feelings, life would be meaningless, and without the possibility for such feelings, God would be impossible. Without the activity of mind, action would be fruitless in so far as concerns the promotion of a more harmonious life at that level of human existence which we know and experience. The realization and experiencing of anything without action is a contradiction. The absence of both actual and possible experience would mean the non-existence of all values. Without at least the possibility for existential objects, there could be nothing.

The a priori for God logically consists of the possibility for such a relationship as we have just described. And, since possibilities necessarily presuppose existence, the a priori for God consists of that kind of existence which has the possibility for evolving and constituting the most abundant life for all people. Furthermore, each new step in the realization of this possibility becomes the existential a priori for the next step in

this process. (The possibility for such a realization always constitutes the logical a priori for God.) At the present stage of existence the a priori for God is constituted by that order of existence and possibilities of mind, action, experience, human feelings, and existential objects, which order of existence and possibilities determines, constitutes, upholds, and promotes the highest value.

The a priori for God consists not alone in mind as the idealists would have us believe; nor does it consist in just being which is apart from any actual or possible mind as it seems the realists hold; nor does it consist in pure experience and action as is implied by some pragmatists; nor does it consist in just feelings alone as is implied by the philosophy of some mystics. It is rather a dynamic relationship, or structure, in which all of these are to be found, and which is of the kind we have just described.

The A Priori for Knowledge of God

What we have just said means that if the possibilities which God has for human living are to be progressively realized, mind must gain knowledge of the nature of the God-order, for mind is one of the determining factors in the a priori for God. This can be done only on the basis of the a priori for religious knowledge. It can be done only through an intelligent investigation of that order of existence and possibilities which constitutes God, or the highest value. That datum which signifies values must be singled out and studied to the end of discovering the highest. This must be done through the use of the scientific method, i.e. observation, reason, and experiment, for as Dewey says, "There is but one method for ascertaining fact and truth--that conveyed by

the word "scientific" in its most general and generous sense."⁵ In other words, the a priori for knowledge is that kind of interaction between mind and the rest of the world which is designated by the term "scientific method."

In the following five steps we shall point out more clearly just what constitutes the a priori for religious knowledge. It is the scientific method, to be sure, but it is the scientific method used in that way which is more or less peculiar to the field of religion. The scientific method is not peculiar to any one field of investigation, but the way it is used is more or less peculiar to each different field.

(1) In order to obtain knowledge of God, we must discover the most general nature of that which religion is seeking, this being called "God." This is done through an analysis of that phenomenon called "religion." We have found that the general nature of this which religion is seeking to be that which is most worthwhile.

(2) We must become positively and absolutely aware of the being of that order of existence and possibilities which constitutes the most worthwhile object. "We cannot search and cannot bring to light unknown possibilities of value unless we believe there are such possibilities to be sought and found."⁶ As we already have shown, this can be and must be more than just a belief. It is a priori knowledge. When the logical and inevitable implications of the first step are seen, one has a priori knowledge of the existence of God. Since the term "God" is used to designate that area of existence and possibilities which consti-

⁵Ibid., p. 33.

⁶H. N. Wieman, The Issues of Life (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1930), p. 245.

tutes the highest value, we cannot doubt the existence of God unless we willfully close our eyes to the inevitable implications of comparative values.

(3) In the third place a persistent search must be made among the vast throng of data that we are constantly experiencing for those specific data in concrete situations which signify that upon which we are dependent for our progressive betterment.

(4) The meanings and implications of these data must be sought and found.

(5) Whether or not we have found the data which signify God, and whether or not we have properly interpreted them, depend upon a testing and re-testing of our conclusion concerning the precise nature of that interaction which constitutes the highest value. In other words, we must experiment with our conclusion and thereby try to determine whether or not our action based upon it progressively promotes, sustains, and enhances the abundant life.

In seeking knowledge of God, all of these five steps must be taken. With the exception of one and two, they must be repeated again and again. We know that God is that order of existence and possibilities which is most worthful, but it is quite another thing to know what people should do in concrete situations so as to realize the possibilities of this order. In other words, we have a priori knowledge of the existence of God, but have only probable knowledge of the precise "will of God" in each concrete situation. But the "will of God" must be found with an increasing degree of certainty if the most abundant life is to be realized. It must be found and can be found only by following through the steps we have just indicated. It cannot be found through wishful thinking. Nor can it be found through the crea-

tion of would-be ideals without regard to the nature of existence.

It is only through our conforming to the a priori for God and the a priori for knowledge of God that we shall be able to obtain valid knowledge of God. This is true because the a priori for God determines what is to be valid knowledge of God, and the a priori for knowledge of God determines how this valid knowledge of God is to be obtained. This is the place of the a priori in religious knowledge.

